A MOST IMPROBABLE SECRETARY

Harold L. Ickes
1933–1946

Ruth Van Cleve

In 1933, he was a most improbable Secretary of the Interior.

He was born not in the West but in Pennsylvania. He dropped out of school in the 8th grade. When he later achieved academic direction, he studied at an upstart school that had been founded only three years before he arrived. He spent most of his years—1890 to 1933—in Chicago, practicing law in a desultory manner and engaging in mostly local politics. And he was a Republican!

But he grew devoted to the West, preferred it to the East he had known, and wrote his friend **William Allen White** in 1921 that, "There is no comparison between the two. The spirit in the small eastern communities, as I knew it . . . is mean and sordid and narrow as compared with the West . . . If I had to pull up stakes now and change my home, it would never occur to me to go east again."

Despite early difficulties, he became an accomplished student and leader of his high school class, winning the respect and support of influential teachers. He graduated from the University of Chicago, soon to become one of America's finest schools, with the help and encouragement of the university president. He regarded the law "as a tool, not a chalice" and used his profession to advance the causes of "Do Gooders" and political liberals. He was a Bull Moose Progressive Republican and, in due course, became a New Deal Democrat.

And he also became, arguably, the most effective Secretary of the Interior in history, as well as one who served in that office longer than anyone else. His service from March 1933 until February 1946 exceeds all other Interior Secretaries and is likely to remain a record, given the Twenty-Second Amendment.

The Early Years

Harold LeClair Ickes, known as "Clair" to most of his intimates for much of his life, was born in 1874 into a desperately poor, dysfunctional family in the railroad city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. His father was irresponsible and uncaring, an often-unemployed alcoholic. His mother, who was very caring, died when he was 16, and he and a much younger sister were swiftly dispatched to Chicago to live with a sympathetic but ineffectual aunt and an uncle who was a classic mean relative. The uncle owned a drug store, employed young Ickes in the store, and paid him no wages at all—routinely requiring his services from 6:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. The boy was, however, permitted to escape during school hours.

It is no wonder that the child grew up to become the original, authentic curmudgeon. Ickes attended Englewood High School, a mile from his job. He began high school earnestly but uncomfortably, but as the years passed, his shyness diminished and his aplomb expanded. He finished his last two years in one and was elected senior class president. He was also chosen by the school's faculty to deliver the Welcoming Address at commencement, a signal honor that required him to wear a proper suit. He had never owned one. After much importuning, his father sent a few dollars, a distant uncle produced a few more, and Ickes was properly turned out for the event.

He was ambitious, wanted more education, and hoped to attend Cornell, the alma mater of a high school teacher, **Miss Rogers**, on whom he had a considerable crush. But the expense was forbidding. A streetcar ride away was the new University of Chicago, founded in 1890 by **William Rainey Harper**, who also served as its first president. The original University of Chicago started in 1859 but closed in 1886 because of financial difficulties.

The new university presented formidable financial problems to Ickes, but yet another Englewood High School teacher arranged a meeting for him with President Harper. The president was so impressed that he assured Ickes of enough campus employment to meet tuition charges. And Ickes found tutoring and night teaching jobs (often of new immigrants) to meet his living costs.

He worked terribly hard and often wondered if the labor was worth the expected reward. But in 1897 he achieved an A.B.—even after failing elementary French (a failure later undone) and struggling by for many months on one meal a day, for he could afford no more. Notwithstanding this marginal living, in his last year at Chicago he blossomed, becoming active in the debate club, managing the university tennis tournament, and being elected president of the University Republican Club. During the summer of 1896, he traveled to Canton, Ohio, to deliver a bas relief profile of Ohio Governor and Presidential candidate William McKinley. Ickes, who presented the gift to McKinley as the candidate sat on his front porch, proudly voted for him in the fall.

The Middle Years

After graduation Ickes turned, a little slowly, to the question of what to do with the rest of his life. For four years he was a newspaper reporter, first a sportswriter and later a political writer. He practiced his reporter's craft in a city that needed help. A British reformer at the time described Chicago as "built upon bribery, intimidation, bulldozing of every kind, knifing, shooting, and the whole swimming in whiskey." Those reporting years persuaded Ickes that a newspapering life was not what he wanted so, like many before and after him who are not sure of what they want to do next, he went to law school.

He was a student at the new (founded in 1902) University of Chicago Law School from 1903 to 1907, extending his stay by a year because he dropped out occasionally to work in political campaigns. But he graduated cum laude and embarked promptly on a career of running or helping to run others' political campaigns. He made common cause with the best of Chicago's reformers, among them **Jane Addams**, his special friend.

Ickes could engage in what was probably often unremunerated employment because he married a very rich woman, **Anna Wilmarth**. They lived well, with many servants, and their house outside of Chicago was huge. Space was necessary because the household was large: Ickes' stepson, **Wilmarth**, who became a spendthrift and much later, a suicide; an adopted daughter, **Frances**; a non-adopted, de facto son, **Robert**, who grew into an irresponsible disappointment; and a biological son, **Raymond**, who was a paragon. Raymond even chose to go to the University of Chicago, which delighted his father. The house was surrounded by a huge acreage, much of it in gardens, and there Ickes, an avid flower gardener, spent happy hours. He was particularly fond of dahlias.

He went to France during World War I, not as a soldier (his hearing had earlier been damaged) but as a YMCA employee—even though he was a self-described "militant agnostic." Daughter Frances went too, as a Red Cross worker. But before and after the war, his employment was largely political organization, usually at the state or local level, and often on the losing end, for he supported increasingly progressive-liberal-reform-minded candidates and causes. He was a genuine Bull Mooser, so devoted to **Theodore Roosevelt** that he voted, years later, for the Cox-Franklin Roosevelt ticket

The laying of the cornerstone of the Main Interior Building.

in some measure because of the connections between the two Roosevelts. But he also ran his wife's several campaigns, always successfully, for the Illinois Legislature. She was a "straight" Republican.

Through a combination of prescience and luck, his and (mostly) Anna's fortune survived the 1929 stock market crash. But he grew increasingly disenchanted by President Hoover's failure to act to stem the Depression woes that were spreading swiftly across the land. He tried, in concert with William Allen White and others of the diminishing band of Progressives, to persuade **Hiram Johnson** to compete with Hoover for the 1932 nomination but Johnson declined. They then turned to **Gifford Pinchot**, who was willing to try but who had inadequate support.

Interior Years—In Peacetime

So, in 1933 came the New Deal. Ickes was an early enthusiast for **Franklin Roosevelt's** programs. He, too, believed that government existed to help those who needed help, and he deplored the essentially *laissez-faire* approach of the Hoover Administration. He applauded Roosevelt's activism and willingness to shape and create agencies and programs that would rescue millions from unemployment and distress.

In July 1932 the Democratic National Committee dispatched an emissary to Chicago to persuade Ickes—well known as a Progressive, liberal Republican as well as an effective political operator—to create and manage an organization that was to become the Western Independent Republican Committee for Roosevelt. Ickes agreed and journeyed to New York to meet with **James Farley**, the Democratic Party's new national committee chairman. Ickes returned to Chicago with the munificent sum of $2,000 to finance the endeavor.

The only opposition he encountered to his role in the Roosevelt campaign came from Anna, his wife, who feared his activity would jeopardize her upcoming bid (as a Republican, of course) for re-election to the Illinois Legislature. (It didn't. She won a third term handily.) He mollified Anna by promising that if Roosevelt were elected, he would seek to become the commissioner of Indian Affairs in the Interior Department. Anna had become a champion of Indian causes while residing in their second home in the Southwest for several months of each year.

It developed that **John Collier**, never an Ickes favorite but already well known for his work on behalf of the Indians, also wanted to be commissioner of Indian Affairs. An assistant secretary's position was dangled before Ickes but after some reflection, he concluded that he'd really like the top job better and he commenced a strenuous lobbying campaign to get it. Ickes was in fact the third choice, the first two being Senator Hiram Johnson, who instantly declined, and **Senator Bronson Cutting**, who ruminated for weeks about accepting before declining.

In February of 1933 Ickes was invited to Roosevelt's Manhattan home, still uncertain of his status. The President-elect told him that he was the Roosevelt choice for Secretary of the Interior but that he, the President-elect, needed to confer with others before making the offer. (Roosevelt's legendary ability to enjoy ambiguity seems to have been at work.) Ickes was summoned back to the Manhattan house a few hours later, where he joined Roosevelt and **Frances Perkins**. The President introduced them to one another and then said, "It is nice to have the Secretary of Labor meet the Secretary of the Interior here tonight." Only then was the matter settled for Ickes. Part of the Roosevelt motive was to include a genuine Progressive in his cabinet, that being the form that diversity took in 1933.

In his first week in office, Secretary Ickes began to keep a diary, at the suggestion of **Paul Douglas**—a young Illinois teacher who later became a U.S. Senator. Ickes continued the diary almost until his death, producing close to five million words. Only about 800,000 have been published, but all—plus a plethora of other papers from a generation of government servants who wrote endlessly and well—make clear the impact of this longest-serving Interior Secretary.

Secretary Ickes did not, of course, accomplish his many purposes. Doubtless no Secretary has. But during his dozen years in office, he made enormous strides forward. Surely one of his proudest achievements, and one of unique importance to the early New Deal and economic recovery, was the Public Works Administration, a creation of the National Recovery Act. After a period of Rooseveltian ambiguity, Ickes was named administrator on July 8, 1933, and he remained in that role until the PWA was moved out of Interior in 1939. It was a giant agency with colossal tasks and an abundance of money, even in 1933 dollars. Congress made $3.3 billion available at the outset.

PWA hired people: 100 lawyers, then engineers, accountants, typists. More than 2,300 new people crowded into the "old" Interior Building, now the headquarters of the General Services Administration. And they built. By 1935, 19,000 projects had been authorized in almost all the counties of the land (3,040 out of 3,073) and in all the territories. Of that number, 11,500 were already completed and 5,500 more were under construction. The PWA spent more than $6 billion during the 1930's. The projects were big and little but above all they were varied: water systems, sewerage systems, hospitals, schools, roads, bridges, docks, court houses. Secretary Ickes was

Secretary Ickes was joined by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in laying the cornerstone of the Main Interior Building on April 16, 1936.

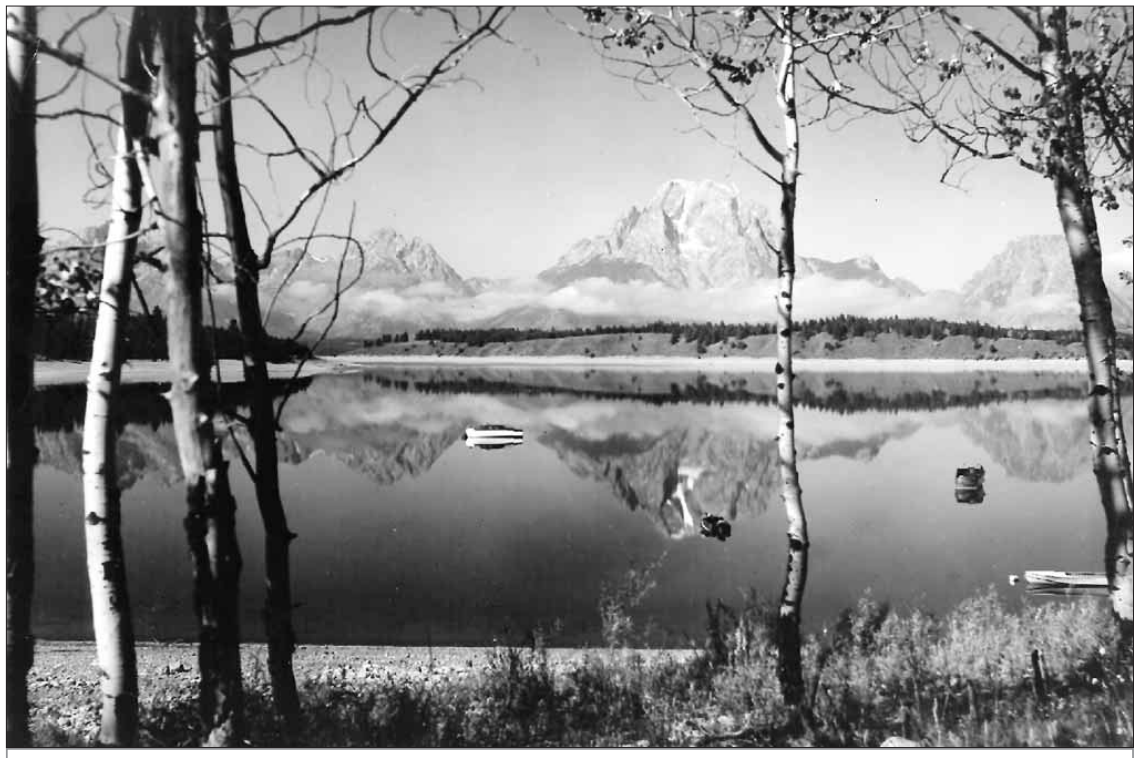
called "a builder to rival Cheops." At least ten million people benefited directly from the program. And all of this was accomplished without corruption. The Secretary created such a complex bureaucratic structure for PWA that, while criticized for being slow, it was virtually guaranteed to preclude waste, fraud, and/or abuse. And it did.

Six years later, under an early Reorganization Plan, the PWA was removed from Interior and renamed the Federal Works Agency. It was to be much reduced in power and size. At his last PWA staff meeting, in June 1939, the Secretary was close to tears and so were his colleagues. They gave him a plaque which said, in somewhat pedestrian language guaranteed to enforce its sincerity: "You have done a job as Administrator of Public Works which has never before been done, and you have done it without blame from friend or foe. You drew the thousands of us from all walks of life, from all corners of the country, and you have welded us into a vital organization of which we are all proud. You have shown neither fear nor favor; you have neither asked nor tolerated any bending of the knee or any concessions to undue influence; and you have asked of us only one thing: that our job be well and truly done for the good of the Nation."

When the Works Progress Administration was created in 1935, as a pure relief agency, Ickes hoped to be named Works Progress Administrator too, but the President awarded that job to **Harry Hopkins**. (Ickes resented that. He thought also that the WPA was so named in order to confuse it with his PWA.) He'd have liked to have had the Civilian Conservation Corps too, but that became the joint responsibility of the Army, Labor, Agriculture, and Interior—the last because Interior had the Office of Education (which would be charged with educating the boys) and the National Park Service (which would benefit from some CCC projects). Surprisingly, this four-headed agency worked, becoming in the view of many observers the most admired and popular of all New Deal innovations.

The usual Interior agencies profited unevenly from the Ickes oversight. The Bureau of Indian Affairs felt little effect, for he preferred not to interfere with his adversary, Commissioner John Collier; and the National Park Service expanded by millions of acres, for it was an Ickes favorite, adding such new parks as the Everglades, Great Smoky Mountains, Olympic, and Kings Canyon.

Perhaps the Secretary's greatest frustration during his Interior years was his constant but ultimately unsuccessful effort to pry the Forest Service out of the Department of Agriculture and into Interior. Agriculture Secretary **Henry Wallace** and those who preceded and succeeded him mounted extraordinary defensive actions that always worked. Gifford Pinchot, former Forest Service director and erstwhile Progressive, lined up in favor of the status quo. So did Forest Service officers and employees who deluged the Congress with letters in favor of staying put. When the President finally endorsed Interior, after years of importuning by Ickes and years of the President's attempting to avoid a decision, it was too late. Too many minds were finally made up.



Ickes persuaded President Roosevelt to create the Jackson Hole National Monument, above, by proclamation in 1943, and he spent most of the rest of his Interior career working to preserve it. The Wyoming Congressional delegation, the Forest Service, and the stockmen fought it desperately.

ICKES' DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

Beneath his curmudgeonly exterior, Harold L. Ickes had the heart of a conservationist and was the first Interior Secretary to argue the value of wilderness as wilderness. He opposed road construction in some parks because it would destroy wilderness while pushing for park expansion elsewhere to provide Americans "the perspective that comes to men and women who can lift up their eyes to Mother Nature." Ickes viewed forests as natural resources like wildlife, watersheds, and scenery, rather than solely as harvestable commodities. "One should get away once in a while as far as possible from human contacts," he noted after visiting Yosemite National Park. "To contemplate nature, magnificently garbed as it is in this country, is to restore peace to the mind."

He intended to remake Interior into a Department of Conservation by absorbing the Bureau of Fisheries from the Department of Commerce and the Bureau of Biological Survey (which oversaw national wildlife refuges) and the Forest Service from the Department of Agriculture. He offered to trade Interior's Grazing Service (created by the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934), the Bureau of Reclamation, the General Land Office, and the Soil Erosion Service to Agriculture for its Forest Service, Bureau of Public Roads, and Bureau of Biological Survey.

When Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace rejected the deal, Ickes turned to Congress, where his allies introduced legislation in 1935 that would have renamed Interior the Department of Conservation and Works and folded the Forest Service into it. Wallace argued that conservation was more an idea than a specific governmental function and that setting up a Department of Conservation was like creating a Department of Prosperity.

The bill was killed in the House, as was a similar measure that passed the Senate in 1936. Ickes continued to fight for his plan and persuaded Roosevelt to include it in reorganization bills the Administration introduce in 1937, 1938, and 1939. But in the 1939 reorganization act, Interior received only the Bureau of Fisheries (from Commerce) and the Bureau of Biological Survey (from Agriculture), which were merged into the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

He could have gotten the Forest Service in exchange for the National Park Service but he wouldn't give up that jewel. As minor retribution, during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930's, Ickes created a Soil Erosion Service in his own PWA. But Wallace of course objected and while Ickes was in the Everglades, the President (with Ickes' knowledge, if not his consent) transferred that agency to Agriculture, where it unarguably belonged.

But life held more than disappointments. Among his triumphs was PWA's construction of the new Interior Building, occupied in 1937. It was the first in Washington to be centrally air-conditioned, the first to have escalators, and its artwork, murals, and sculpture exceeded in quality and quantity anything ever placed in a public building in America. It was certainly the finest government office building in Washington and many contend that it continues to be to this day.

Anna Ickes died in 1935 in an automobile accident. In 1938, the Secretary achieved a great personal triumph when he entered a new marriage that was, it appears, truly made in heaven. He married **Jane Dahlman**, 39 years his junior, but the May-September match proved superb. They lived comfortably in a Maryland house that matched (many said exceeded) Mount Vernon in its splendor and they had two children—daughter **Elizabeth** and son **Harold McEwen Ickes** (who achieved celebrity as a close advisor to President Clinton during his first term).

Perhaps Secretary Ickes' most gratifying public moment came on Easter Sunday 1939. **Marian Anderson**, probably then the world's greatest contralto, was booked to sing in Washington. The auditorium that had been reserved for her by the Howard University Concert Series was destroyed by fire. Because a large crowd was expected, a capacious auditorium was necessary, so Howard sought the one at all-white Cardozo High School. But the Washington Board of Education declined because of the expected racially mixed audience. When the Daughters of the American Revolution refused the use of Constitution Hall (precipitating **Eleanor Roosevelt's** resignation as a DAR member), the Lincoln Memorial was suggested as a substitute. (Though he engineered the event, Ickes did not claim credit for this brilliant idea. Many did claim credit, but it was probably Assistant Secretary **Oscar Chapman** who first proposed it.)

The concert was a high point in the lives of almost everyone involved, including Marian Anderson and Harold Ickes, who introduced her. Some 75,000 came and many were moved to tears as she sang *America*, *Ave Maria*, two spirituals—*Gospel Train* and *Trampin'*, and several other classics. Those who weren't there can be stirred by the event even now, as they view the magnificent mural depicting it on a ground floor wall of the Main Interior Building. Secretary Ickes was generally regarded as the most effective advocate of black people in the Roosevelt administration. He did more, it is usually agreed, than any other to support black causes, including integrating the Department and appointing minorities to high positions.

Interior Years - In Wartime

Secretary Ickes began to fight World War II well before Dec. 7, 1941. When democracies throughout the world were refusing entry to Jewish refugees from Germany and other European countries, he proposed using the Virgin Islands as a temporary residence for some, even achieving an endorsement of the plan by the Virgin Islands Legislature. But the matter was within the jurisdiction of the Department of State and Secretary of State **Cordell Hull** refused to cooperate. (On the subject of anti-Semitism, as in the case of discrimination against black people, Ickes was ahead of others in the Roosevelt Administration.)

When an American company proposed exporting helium gas to Germany, Ickes refused to approve the contract and the company couldn't and didn't, even though Cordell Hull strenuously objected to Ickes' intransigence. When, as national petroleum coordinator, he refused to issue licenses for petroleum shipments to Japan in the summer of 1941, Secretary Hull again disagreed, pointing out that his department, not Mr. Ickes, was in charge of foreign policy. Secretary Ickes could not win that argument.

When war came to America, everyone's responsibilities changed and Washington almost burst with the infusion of thousands of new people. To read now of the critical and complex work that had to be done, and of the almost endless hours of night and day labor that it took to do it, is to leave the reader quite breathless, almost incredulous, and utterly in admiration of these devoted servants. And no one, short of the President, assumed a heavier load than Secretary Ickes.

In 1943, Alexander Hamilton, the president of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, presented medals to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, National Park Service assistant director Arthur E. Demaray, and Harlean James, of the Interior Department's Historic American Buildings Survey. NPS photo courtesy of the Harpers Ferry Historic Photograph Collection

For the first year of the war, in his capacity as petroleum coordinator for Defense, he did battle more or less constantly with the Board of Economic Warfare, chaired by Henry Wallace. Ickes felt that only he was strong enough to guard vital oil supplies, and in December 1942 he was rewarded with the title of Petroleum Administrator for War. He fought with the War Production Board to be allocated enough steel to build the "Big Inch" and the "Little Big Inch" pipelines. He won. They were built in record time (oil began flowing in December 1943) and the East Coast thereby got enough oil for the rest of the war.

He did battle with **John L. Lewis** and the United Mine Workers, serving as the President's negotiator in coal strikes, winning some and losing some. But after 1943 the miners largely returned to work. (Lewis hated almost everyone in Washington, particularly the President, who returned the sentiment. But he respected Secretary Ickes.) He was in the thick of the rubber shortage, working hard to achieve gas rationing to alleviate it, and rationing commenced Dec. 1, 1942.

And he carried on his regular duties. Ickes fretted about martial law and the suspension of *habeas corpus* in Hawaii, but not until late 1944 did the military relent. Martial law was then terminated and *habeas corpus* restored. He argued with Governor **Ernest Gruening** about the placement of the Alaskan Highway. Gruening wanted it on the coast. Ickes, who wanted it farther east, prevailed for security reasons. He inherited the role of high commissioner for the Philippines—a job quite vacant in September 1942—and it remained in Interior until Philippine independence in 1946.

Secretary Ickes was an instant critic of the Japanese relocation program that started in February 1942, terming the relocation centers "fancy-named concentration camps," and when few others joined him in dismay over the inequity and irrationality of the program, Ickes was charged in February 1944 with running the War Relocation Authority. By then it had become a program to return the camp's inhabitants to mainstream American society. He was chosen for this virtually impossible job because, it was acknowledged, he had been the severest critic of the original relocation camps.

A War Refugee Board was created in 1944 to help rescue some of Europe's persecuted people but it came to little, extending further a pattern of U. S. nonchalance on this subject. The War Refugee Board resulted in the establishment of just one refugee camp, at Fort Ontario in upstate New York. The camp was to receive 984 refugees from Yugoslavia, mostly Jews. And oversight of the camp was given to Secretary Ickes.

In the face of the Holocaust, the effort was almost immaterial (except to those 984 refugees), but true to form, Ickes served this group diligently, arranging at war's end for their residence in the United States if they chose.

The Later Years

President Truman and Secretary Ickes did not admire one another. As a survivor of the original New Deal Cabinet, Ickes expected to leave his position, as his other Cabinet colleagues had done, soon after President Truman was sworn into office. But he decided to wait so as to resign "gracefully," his diary said, over an issue. (The only other 1933 Cabinet survivor in April 1945 was Frances Perkins, who was invited by President Truman to leave by June 30, 1945. When she did, Secretary Ickes became the longest serving Cabinet officer of any department in U. S. history.)

In August 1945, President Truman asked Secretary Ickes to continue in his posts and the Secretary agreed. But an issue soon arose to prompt his not-so-graceful departure. In January 1946, Ickes learned that the President proposed to nominate **Edwin Pauley** as Secretary of the Navy. Pauley was a California oil man who was interested in the exploitation of offshore oil. In a conversation with Ickes in September 1944, Pauley had stated that he would raise substantial amounts of money for the 1944 Presidential campaign, if Ickes would refrain from pressing a lawsuit to establish federal ownership of the tidelands.

Ickes regarded this as blackmail, as a latter-day Teapot Dome, and would have none of it. When called by the Senate Committee to testify on the Pauley nomination, Ickes testified to all of this and then submitted his resignation, to become effective March 31, 1946. The President more or less simultaneously fired him, effective almost immediately (February 13, 1946). There followed what may have been the largest press conference in Washington history. It was held in the Interior Department auditorium and Ickes clearly enjoyed it. There also followed the President's withdrawal of the Pauley nomination.

Ickes was now free to pursue a new career, one he had often longed to have. He became a newspaper columnist, three times a week for the *New York Post* and its syndicate, later writing a weekly column for the *New Republic* as well. His contract precluded changes or deletions by anyone, and he greatly enjoyed the freedom.

He could engage in invective without restraint, and his old-fashioned liberal views were predictable. He inveighed against The Interests—oil, timber, stockmen; against nuclear testing in the Pacific; against racial discrimination; for the State of Israel; for the firing of **General MacArthur**; and against **J. Parnell Thomas** and **Joseph McCarthy**.

Although his health was declining, he even joined the 1946 Presidential campaign, reconciling with the President as he did so (and with the President saying he wished Ickes had stayed on). Ickes was as sure as most that the President would lose but he spoke for him nonetheless, and it took him several days after the election to grasp Truman's victory.

He continued to write, keeping his diary through 1951, at the end of which he was hospitalized with a degenerative form of arthritis. He had several heart attacks, the last of which occurred Feb. 3, 1952. He died that night. At the service at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC three days later, an enormous crowd gathered, including the President and much of official Washington.

But a far larger crowd gathered at the Lincoln Memorial in April, on about the 13th anniversary of the concert that no one could forget. The executive secretary of the Washington Federation of Churches praised Harold Ickes, "For his life of integrity, for his impatience with racial barriers, for his courageous championship of unpopular but good causes; for his warm friendship and for his selflessness, we are a grateful people."

And then out stepped Marian Anderson, in a sweeping blue gown, carrying red roses. She sang Bach's *Come Sweet Death* and *Ave Maria*. And then the audience rose, and together they sang *America the Beautiful*.

Harold Ickes was a man of total honesty and the noblest of purposes.

Ruth Van Cleave, an attorney and author, was the director of the Office of Territories at Interior and a member of the Solicitor's Office before retiring in 1995. She lives in Alexandria, Virginia.